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Marsha Mehran

Pomegranate Soup



arrow books

the devil himself, but saw instead the glitter of something golden; a bright obscenity that occupied his entire field of vision.

The surly drink baron growled and spat on the cracked pavement below the old bakery's door. It was pure witchcraft, that's what. No doubt about it. And he was going to find out exactly who was behind it all.

Chapter One

Dolmeh

Ingredients:

- 30–40 canned vine leaves
- 2 onions, chopped
- 250g ground meat, lamb or beef
- olive oil
- 1/3 cup fresh summer savory
- 1/2 cup fresh dill
- 1/3 cup fresh tarragon
- 1/4 cup fresh mint
- 1/2 cup fresh lime juice
- 2 cups cooked basmati rice

1 tsp salt

½ tsp ground black pepper

For Marjan Aminpour, the fragrance of cardamom and rose water, alongside basmati, tarragon and summer savory, were everyday kinds of smells; as common, she imagined, as the aromas of instant coffees and dripping roasts were to conventional Western kitchen corners.

Despite being born in a land of ancient deserts, where dry soil mingled with the crumbled remains of Persepolitan pillars, Marjan had a great talent for growing plants. She had learned from an early age how to tempt the most stubborn seedlings to take root, even before she could spell their plant names in Farsi. Guided by the gentle hands of Baba Pirooz, the old bearded gardener who tended the grounds of her childhood home, young Marjan cultivated furry stalks of marjoram and golden angelica in dark mounds of earth. The dirt drew its moisture from melted mountain snow, which trickled down from the nearby Alborz into Tehran's wealthier suburbs, before flowing into the Aminpour's large octagonal fountain. Bubbling at

the centre of the walled garden, the pool was lined with turquoise and green Esfahani tiles.

While Marjan trained her eye to spot the first yellow buds of tarragon, or to catch a weed's surreptitious climb up the stalk of a dill plant, Baba Pirooz would recount the long line of celebrated gardeners who had been born on Persian soil. 'Avicenna,' Baba Pirooz began, clearing his throat, 'Avicenna was the most famous plant lover of them all. Did you know, Marjan Khanoum, that this wise physician was the first man ever to make rosewater? He squeezed the soft petals for their oils, then bottled the precious liquid for the world to enjoy. What a Persian, what a man!' the old gardener would exclaim, pausing only long enough in his lectures to ignite the strawberry tobacco he smoked in a knobby little pipe.

As an adult, Marjan carried the warm memories of Baba Pirooz and her childhood garden with her wherever she went. Not a day went by that she was not on the lookout for some mound of soil to plunge her fingers into. Using her bare knuckles, engraved with terracotta dust and mulch, she massaged her chosen herb or flower

into the soil's folds, whispering loving encouragements along the way. And no matter how barren that slice of earth had been before, once Marjan gave it her special attention, there was no limit to all that could blossom within its charged chambers.

In the many places she had lived – and there had been quite a few in her twenty-seven years – Marjan had always planted a small herb garden, consisting of at least one seedling of basil, parsley, tarragon and summer savory. Even in the gloomy English flats she and her sisters had occupied for the last seven years since leaving Iran, Marjan had successfully grown a rainbow of cooking herbs in the blue ceramic flowerpots lining her kitchen windowsill. Always the consummate professional, no amount of rain clouds could tempt her to give up planting.

Marjan tried to keep her past perseverance in mind now as she stood in the old pastry shop's kitchen mixing a second batch of *dolmeh* stuffing. She wished she'd had more time to cultivate a healthy ensemble of fresh tarragon, mint and summer savory to add to the *dolmehs* that she

and her younger sisters, Bahar and Layla, were making. Perhaps if she had planted something here in Ballinacroagh, she could have avoided the anxieties that were now creeping up her spine. Well, it was best not to have such regrets, Marjan reminded herself, especially when she couldn't do anything about them. There was still one more batch of the stuffed vine leaves to go – not to mention half a dozen other mouth-watering delicacies – and Time, that cantankerous old fool, was not on her side.

The Babylon Café was set to open in less than five hours. Five hours! In this new town that she could hardly pronounce, let alone spell. Ballinacroagh. Ba-li-na-crow. A whole town full of people who would come to taste her fares with questioning eyes and curious tongues. And, unlike her other stints in the kitchen, this time she would be responsible for everything.

Marjan's heart quickened as she browned the ground meat and onions together over the low, dancing flame. The satisfied pan hissed as she introduced dried versions of her precious herbs, which, if soaked overnight, worked almost as well

as their fresher relatives. Working her entire torso, she mixed the herbs with the cooked rice, fresh lime juice, salt and pepper. She stirred with all her might despite the unrelenting ache in her shoulders, for such strong rotations were necessary to the *dolmehs*' harmony.

Rubbing her tired arms, Marjan glanced across the old bakery's kitchen at her sister Bahar, who was rolling up the first batch of *dolmehs*. With her wide and piercing eyes, Bahar always looked intense when she worked in the kitchen – as if her life depended on whichever vegetable or herb was being sacrificed on the chopping board before her. Surprisingly, out of the three Aminpour sisters, it was petite Bahar who possessed the greatest upper-arm strength. Fragile in most every other way, Bahar had shoulders and arms that were as powerful as those of a man twice her size, which came in handy whenever jars needed to be opened or there was mixing to be done.

Marjan picked up the wooden spoon and returned to the *dolmeh*. Her sister looked too busy now to help her beat the remaining stuffing, for

not only was Bahar concentrating on rolling her own vine leaves but she was also keeping Layla's work in check. No matter how many times Marjan was reminded of the differences in her younger sisters' personalities, there was nothing like the simple act of rolling *dolmeh* to show her how poles apart Bahar and Layla really were.

Bahar, guided by a stern inner compass, smartly slapped each vine leaf (vein side up) on the chopping board. It was a consistent, methodical march that started with a no-nonsense scoop of stuffing with her left hand, followed by a skilled right-handed tuck of the vine leaf. Then, bringing the *dolmeh* to a clean surrender, she briskly rolled the vine leaf from the bottom up. Despite her rather gruff manner, Bahar's method for rolling *dolmeh* was always successful; she ensured that her little bundles of good fortune were secure on the road up, lest all that she had gathered should fall asunder.

Rolling was always where Layla faltered, for her method was more carefree and altogether too trusting. Although Marjan and Bahar demonstrated the right way endless times, Layla would

still leave her *dolmehs* vulnerable to the elements. One could always tell which bundles were hers, for if neither of her older sisters was quick enough to catch the spill of stuffing, re-rolling the vine leaf while shaking her head, the moment of truth came an hour later with the opening of the oven door. Among the neat, aromatic green fingers expertly tucked by Marjan and Bahar would be the younger girl's unmistakable burst parcels of golden filling. And for some strange reason, they always smelled of Layla's signature scent – rose water and cinnamon.

It was a familiar enough smell, this faint perfume that accompanied Layla's every move, but odd for a recipe that did not contain either ingredient. The cinnamon-rose *dolmehs* never really surprised her sisters, though. Layla had a way of raising expectations beyond the ordinary.

When Thomas McGuire's spits and curses hit the pavement outside the old pastry shop, Bahar was in the middle of removing a tray of cooked *dolmehs* from the oven. After forty-five minutes they were as perfectly symmetrical as the greatest Persian

carpets; the tray a clean loom upon which the stuffed vine-leaf fingers were lined in even clusters and patterns. Although the kitchen was at the back of the shop, Thomas's vulgar excretions carried clearly to Bahar's sensitive ears. Gasping with surprise, she reached for the hot tray of *dolmehs* with bare hands and paid dearly for her distraction with the start of smoking blisters.

'Quick! Get under the cold water! Layla – *aloe vera*! Bahar, stop squeezing your thumb like that!' Marjan yelled, pushing Bahar towards the sink. As the eldest of the three, Marjan was accustomed to directing her sisters in emergencies.

Bahar shuddered as the cold water ran over her scorched thumb. In the upstairs flat, a small one-bedroom residence that the Delmonicos had used as an office and storage area, Layla scrambled through open cardboard boxes looking for the green bottle of soothing gel.

'I can't find the aloe! Are you sure you packed it?' she yelled down to the kitchen.

'Yes!' Marjan hollered. 'Look in the small box that says "Miscellaneous"!'

'Don't worry. It's stopped already. See? I'll just

put an ice cube on it,' said Bahar, sticking out her horrified thumb so Marjan could see the rising welts.

Bahar tried to put on a brave face, but inside she felt a lot like that thumb of hers. Born, as her name indicated, on the first day of the Persian spring, she had the superstitious nature of people whose birthdays fall on the cusp of changing seasons. She was forever looking over her shoulders for fear that she had stepped on cracks or wandered under ladders. Bahar's inherent nervousness had escalated to a deeper malaise in recent years, the result of unspeakable events that had left indelible scars. Although her neurotic tendencies often irritated the more hardy teenager Layla, Marjan's heart just softened a bit more every time she saw her sister jump so.

'Are you sure you're all right? Listen, I'll finish the *dolmeh*. Just mix the rice for me, okay?' Marjan gave Bahar an ice cube wrapped in a torn piece of newspaper and placed the piping tray of *dolmehs* on a low, wooden island in the middle of the kitchen.

Made especially for a man of Napoleonic

measurements, this rectangular table had been the centrepiece of Luigi Delmonico's kingdom, where he rolled, powdered, slapped and whipped the exquisite paninis and chocolate-filled brioches he would later showcase in his beloved Papa's Pastries. It was also where Estelle, his bride of forty-five years, had found him dead – three hours after the bowl of meringue he was preparing had stiffened into a pink, cotton-candied tutu.

Of course, Estelle failed to mention this last point when she had shown the three sisters around the place five days ago; though, in reality, it probably would have made little difference. The girls' battered boxes were already shipped over and waiting to be picked up in Castlebar. Besides, the shop, complete with all the appliances and utensils of a working kitchen (albeit outdated and a bit rusty), was perfect for what Marjan had in mind. And it came at a bargain price.

'My niece told me that you are the best chef she has ever seen. Gloria, she's a very good girl, no?'

Mrs Delmonico had stood in the kitchen after the grand tour, the dying afternoon rays entering lazily through a narrow, stained-glass partition in the back door and illuminating the dust particles floating above her peppery hair. All surfaces, from counter tops to the stacks of pots and dishes, were cloaked in a good inch of the snowy stuff.

'Oh, Gloria was very good to us when we arrived in Lewisham. A great friend,' Marjan said. Behind her, Bahar and Layla both nodded in agreement. 'But, I think she was exaggerating a bit on my abilities. I was only a sous chef. She was the real talent at the restaurant.'

'Yes, Gloria knows how to cook *parmigiana* and *manicotti*, but who doesn't? Maybe to those English that is gourmet, but you should have seen my grandmother cook! Pfff! If she was still alive today she would be rich from her cooking, I tell you!'

Estelle Delmonico laughed and placed her chubby hands on her hips. The good-natured widow cocked her head and offered a smile to each of the three young women. Fate had it that, although blessed with the welcoming girth of

child-bearing hips, she had never been able to give Luigi a baby of their own. It was one of her few regrets in an otherwise fortunate and colourful life. Thankfully, her barrenness had never turned to resentment; a blessing Estelle often accredited to her niece, on whom she was able to practise all the loving criticisms her own mother had lavished upon her. Gloria was a great source of release for Estelle Delmonico, and now she had sent her three darlings to look after as well.

'Okay, then? You will take the store, eh?'

Marjan turned to Bahar and Layla, both of whom appeared to be asleep standing up. Their drawn, exhausted faces had the look of *torshi*, pickled onions that have been pulled from their bed of vinegar and salt. Who could blame them, really? It had been a long four days since they left London, shipping off their hastily packed boxes and throwing a few personal belongings into two worn, tartan suitcases; the same suitcases that had seen them through the Iranian desert a long time ago. The plane ride from London to Knock had been painfully tedious; Immigration and Customs

even worse. Answering the same questions about their religion and ethnic background over and over again. Then two days holed up in a backpackers' hostel in the nearby town of Castlebar, waiting for their boxes to arrive while they survived on white bread and some hard cheese that Marjan had bought from a corner grocery. Layla, of course, had complained all the way (such was the prerogative of her age), but Bahar had remained sullen, her big doe eyes wet with frightened tears.

But, thought Marjan, the worst certainly seemed behind them. Especially now that they were standing in this dusty little kitchen, with this generous Italian woman. It was time for a new start, time for them to take all the money they had in the world and finally make something of those years of hardship.

'You stay, yes?' Estelle Delmonico pulled a heavy, corroded key from a hidden pocket in her black dress. Toothy and archaic, it was the kind of key that would have released Pandora's own demons.

'Yes.' Marjan nodded, accepting the key. 'We'll stay. How would you like the rent paid? Monthly or weekly?'

'Agh, don't worry about that now. You give it to me whenever you have it, yes? I think what is more important is to get you a big bowl of my minestrone soup. That would put some energy in this pretty face, eh?' Mrs Delmonico walked over to Layla and lightly patted her left cheek.

Marjan, determined to keep up the momentum that had carried them from London, over the Irish Sea and into this land of crazed sheep and dizzying roads, shook her head, more to her sisters than to the jolly widow.

'Thank you, but I'm afraid we can't. There is so much to do. Bahar and Layla have to unpack, and I have to get to Dublin as soon as possible for ingredients. It would be much quicker than trying to find some of the food we need here, I suspect,' she said.

'Hah! You are right! My Luigi would sometimes get so red in the face about these village markets. Mini-markets, they call them! I could find more in my mama's back garden in Napoli than in most of these *mini-markets*.'

'Yes, Naples – Napoli, sounds beautiful. I hear the *erberias* there are filled with the most